Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Stormont House
Belfast
Northern Ireland
BT4 3SH

27th January 2017

Dear Secretary of State,

As the organisation representing doctors and medical students, the British Medical Association in Northern Ireland would like to offer to work with you ahead of any negotiations to leave the EU which will affect our health and social care system, the medical profession, and the services we provide to our patients. Consultation and co-operation between our respective bodies is vitally important given recent political developments and the need to ensure that cross-border co-operation, with particular regard to healthcare, is not impeded following Brexit.

The issues facing the medical profession across the UK ahead of our withdrawal from the EU are considerable but have the potential to be felt even more profoundly in Northern Ireland given our unique situation of sharing a land border with the Republic of Ireland. I am particularly keen to highlight to you the challenges we face in regard to cross border health services, the mobility of staff, the regulation and training of doctors and the preservation of professional standards and employment rights.

Many doctors, particularly those working in areas bordering the Republic of Ireland, deliver healthcare on an all island basis, providing services to patients living on both sides of the border. There are many examples of cross border healthcare, including the cardiology unit based in Altnagelvin hospital in the north west, which provides lifesaving care to patients from County Donegal. There is a very real risk that Brexit, and the policies which emerge as a result of our withdrawal from the EU could undermine or jeopardise these vital health services and the ability of medical professionals to deliver them.

There are also particular concerns around controls on immigration following Brexit and the impact this will have on health services and health professionals in Northern Ireland, which needs to be considered. Specifically, I am seeking assurances from you that doctors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, particularly those who travel daily across the border to work, will
maintain the ability to move between both jurisdictions to deliver these vital health services without undue hindrance to their professional lives.

The mutual recognition of qualifications (MRPQ) enables doctors who qualified in the EU to work in the UK and vice versa and it will be essential that the government considers the importance of maintaining MRPQ as part of its negotiations to leave the EU. There are a significant number of doctors currently practicing in Northern Ireland who graduated from a medical school in an EU country other than the UK. A high proportion of these doctors are UK citizens who went to medical school in the Republic of Ireland. Given the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland, it is vital that the government maintains reciprocal arrangements with the Republic of Ireland once the UK leaves the EU should it wish these skilled UK citizens return to deliver health services here.

The measures I have highlighted above are key to attracting and retaining highly skilled medical professionals in Northern Ireland. Anecdotal evidence from our members already suggests that the ongoing uncertainty following Brexit is hindering the ability of the health system in Northern Ireland to recruit and retain medical professionals; I am urging you to make representations to your colleagues in government to highlight the particular challenges facing Northern Ireland.

I am keen to meet with you or representatives as soon as possible to discuss how the negotiations to leave the EU will affect the medical profession, the health and social care system and public health services in Northern Ireland: this is critical to ensuring that doctors and medical students continue to be able to deliver the highest standards of patient care once the UK leaves the EU.

Bernadette Maginnis, Political Liaison Officer, can be contacted on bmaginnis@bma.org.uk or 02890 269678 to arrange a meeting.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Dr John D Woods
Chair
Northern Ireland Council